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SUBJECT: Somalia - Update on Detained VOA Somali Reporter

REF: 09 NAIROBI 2553

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert Patterson, Counselor for Somalia Affairs, State
Department, Embassy Nairobi; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

1. (S) Voice of America (VOA) Somali Service reporter Mohamed Yasin Isaq remains in the custody of Puntland authorities, though he has yet to be charged with any crime. Puntland President "Faroole" replied to the Ambassador's December 29 letter (reftel) with an assertion that Isaq is being held not in connection with his media work, but on suspicion of being "involved in activities jeopardizing the security of Puntland." Various observers have told us that "Faroole's" son is likely managing this situation, and that the security charges are baseless. At the same time, most have told us that the U.S. government has made all the right moves in attempting to secure Isaq's release. We are evaluating options for further action if Faroole remains entrenched. End summary.

Faroole Claims Security

Charges Forthcoming

2. (S) Voice of America (VOA) Somali Service reporter Mohamed Yasin Isaq has been in the custody of Puntland authorities since December 21 (reftel), but has yet to be charged with a crime. Puntland President "Faroole" replied to Ambassador's Ranneberger's December 29 letter demanding Isaq's release with a January 2 letter (forwarded via email to AF) asserting that Isaq's arrest is not related to his work in journalism. Instead, he is suspected of being "involved in activities jeopardizing the security of Puntland." In his letter, "Faroole" added that ill-intentioned actors have been known to "disguis[e] themselves as reporters using the good name of reputed international media agencies, such as VOA and BBC to cover up their malicious intentions against Puntland." The letter backs "Faroole's" insinuation in our December 22 phone call with him that Isaq is somehow associated with al-Shabaab.

Thoughts from
Observers

13. (S) All observers with whom we have discussed this situation agree that the charges of Isaq being affiliated with al-Shabaab are baseless. Sources in both the Puntland Intelligence Agency and Puntland police indicate that they have no evidence against the VOA reporter. The Managing Director of a Puntland radio station told us that "Farooole's" son and close adviser, and who has usurped power from relevant authorities including the Puntland Minister of Information, is likely behind the arrest. The contact also said that Isaq is in the habit of pressing his luck without regard for the authorities, as evidenced by his decision on November 18, 2009, to run a roadblock, which resulted in his being shot in the shoulder. The contact added that in order to do media work in Puntland, one must tread carefully with Puntland authorities, or risk being silenced by detention, however spurious. The Senior Adviser to the Transitional Federal Government's (TFG) Minister of Information told us that the TFG is cooperating with Puntland's Minister of Information, who informed the TFG Minister that the

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matter is related to a security issue. The Minister promised to keep the TFG up to date on the case. A Nairobi-based Somali reporter echoed the sentiments of many, citing this case as another example of the deteriorating situation for journalists in Puntland, and fingered "Farooole's" son as the likely mastermind of this silencing of another journalist.

Weighing
Options

14. (C) To date, no charges have been filed against Isaq. We continue to press, both publicly and privately, for Puntland authorities to either charge Isaq and produce evidence of his wrongdoing, or to release him unconditionally.
RANNEBERGER